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PAMPHLETS

ON

THE COUNTRY CHURCH

vol. 2

WHY COUNTRY CHURCHES FAIL

BY JOSEPH H. ODELL

AUTHOR OF "MOSES BREEZE, DOCTOR OF SICK CHURCHES," ETC.

ON the eve of their wedding-day, an affianced couple were indulging in those solemn self-disclosures which such an occasion invites. He had told her of his faults and shortcomings, and had received an ample absolution. She was engaged in revealing her true, innermost self, and he found nothing to forgive.

"But, my dear, I haven't told you the very worst," she said. "I am a somnambulist."

"Oh, don't worry about it," he replied with an easy, chivalrous air. "My father was a Methodist and my mother a Baptist, and I'd just as soon go to that church as any other!"

There are so many possible morals to be drawn from the story that its application is better left to the individual reader. We may be permitted, however, to ask a very pertinent question—is the church walking in its sleep? If so, is it not time for an awakening, however rude that awakening must be?

Statistics, when viewed in grand totals, may be consoling and even inspiring, but they may also numb the brain and drug the conscience. The general temper and attitude of the nation as a whole may be equally misleading. According to the "grand totals," the American church is a healthy and vigorous institution. Judged by the disposition of the people, the Christian church holds a high position in popular esteem. Is it a case of toleration and goodwill run to seed?

In no country on earth is there so marked a disposition to give the church a square deal, to allow it every opportunity for free development—which probably accounts for the fact that the latest United States religious census reports the statistics of one hundred and eighty-six separate and distinct denominations, besides more than a thousand individualistic and independent churches that could not find a place within any of the regular sects. The one thing that is not true about our religion is that it is mere sentiment. Organized religion in America is a vast, concrete, and practical fact attested by fifteen hundred millions of dollars invested in property, with overhead fixed charges of about two hundred millions a year.

In spite of these figures, religion is not a trust, and more's the pity. Whatever opinions we may hold about commercial combinations, the greatest boon to this country would be an organized ecclesiastical movement in restraint of competition — a wide-spread, systematic merging of rival church organizations. The immediate need of the Protestant churches in the United States is not a revival of religion, but a renascence of common sense; less homiletics and more economics.

COUNTRY DISTRICTS OVERCHURCHED

The rural population suffers most from ecclesiastical waste. From a poetical standpoint, it is advantageous to have the white spire of a church in every landscape; from a practical point of view, it is a financial and spiritual crime. Ten churches may dismally fail where one would be conspicuously successful. When you overmultiply prophets, they become parasites.

One central unified institution in the midst of a rural community can minister to its intellectual, social, and spiritual needs; divide the one into ten little Zions, and you have a cluster of mutually nullifying units, each ineffective, and in the aggregate a drain upon the people.

The time has come to face the facts as they are. Let us take a typical case—that of Lake Township, in Wayne County, Pennsylvania.

Lake Township has a population of twelve hundred, the people being represen-

tative American citizens. They have three post-offices, seven schoolhouses, one bank, and one saloon. The church figures are as follows:

10 church buildings.
14 congregations (two of them meeting in schoolhouses).
10 denominations.
$30,000 invested in church property.
$4,180 raised by churches per year.
$500 sent into the township by denominational home mission boards.
405 church members—36.75 per cent of the population.
29 average membership of churches.
$10.07 average annual contribution per member.
40 average attendance at Sunday worship of each church.
10 ministers engaged in preaching.
$750 maximum salary paid to minister.
1 minister with regular college and theological training.
7 ministers with little more than high-school training.

One's first impression from these figures may be that Lake Township is the most intensely religious spot on the American continent. A backward glance at the church membership, however, shows that more than sixty-three per cent of its twelve hundred people are not members of any church organization. In spite of the fact that it has a congregation for every eighty-eight inhabitants, nearly two-thirds of them are outside of the pale.

WHY CHURCHES FAIL IN LAKE TOWNSHIP

Doubtless one of the reasons for failure in such cases is that the ministers, on the whole, are ill-equipped for their work. Another is that the small congregations are necessarily engaged in a desperate struggle for existence, each chiefly anxious to keep its own little conventicle alive. But the outstanding cause is the fact that these churches are not meeting the obvious needs of the community.

In one part of this particular township there is a book-club, organized three or four years ago. There is one small school library. A patrol of Boy Scouts is being organized in one of the churches. If there were one or two centrally placed churches, with reading-rooms and recreation grounds, with agricultural institutes and exhibits at stated intervals, with literary and social entertainments of a high type, with ministers trained to understand and fill the varied needs of the people, there is little doubt that the story would be entirely different. Ten men and ten churches can fail where one would succeed.

A WIDER SURVEY IN INDIANA

Three typical counties in Indiana furnish an example of deplorable division and consequent inefficiency.

Daviess County, population 27,747, church membership 32.5 per cent.
Marshall County, population 24,175, church membership 27.4 per cent.
Boone County, population 24,673, church membership 41.6 per cent.

There are 231 churches in the three counties, and they have succeeded in interesting one-third of the population. Of these 231 churches, 38.6 per cent are growing, 13.6 per cent are standing still, and 47.8 per cent are losing ground. Thirty-one churches have recently been abandoned as unworkable, representing a loss of invested capital of $50,000. The existing churches are divided among 41 denominations.

There are 115 resident ministers, with an average salary of $592 per year, about $50 a month, or the wage of an unskilled laborer. In point of fact, that is all they are, in many cases. Of the ministers laboring in these three counties, 72 per cent do not possess a college and seminary education; 57 per cent do not have college training of any kind; and 37 per cent never went beyond the common school.

One township may be taken as an example of the utter folly of the Protestants, in contrast to the Catholics. Bogard Township, in Daviess County, has 1,393 Protestants in its population, 491 church members, 9 church buildings, and no resident minister; while the 300 Catholics of the township have one beautiful building and a resident priest.

The conclusions reached from a study of these three rural counties in Indiana are exactly the same as in Lake Township in Pennsylvania. We find that there are too many small churches; the ministry is ill-equipped for its work; and there is almost complete neglect of opportunity in grasping the peculiar needs of rural communities.

The last point can be illustrated by an analysis of the manner in which each dollar is spent by the churches:

Minister's salary..... 53 cents.
Buildings and repairs..... 20 cents.

Benevolences ..... 16 cents.
Sunday school..... 10 4-5 cents.
Social life..... 1-5 of one cent.

The effect of this policy is visible at once in the composition of the churches. Out of the ninety-one churches in Marshall County, twenty-five report that they have no young men under twenty-one years of age, and Boone County has twenty-one churches without young men. With literature brought by the rural free delivery, and lodges at the various crossroads, young men are not likely to flock to institutions which deny their social instincts, and offer nothing but sectarian and doctrinal pabulum.

CONDITIONS IN ILLINOIS AND MISSOURI

A recent survey of forty-four country communities in Illinois gives the record of two hundred and twenty-five churches, Protestant and Catholic. Of these seventy-seven are growing, forty-five are at a standstill, fifty-six are losing ground, and forty-seven are practically dead and abandoned. The church members form thirty-one per cent of the population, but only about nineteen per cent attend church regularly.

The saddest feature about these Illinois rural districts is the utter absence of any facilities for recreation and amusement. Life is a cheerless grind, the only relief being neighborhood gossip at the post-office or the nearest grain-elevator. The land is growing poorer for lack of proper methods of farming.

The effect of this upon the churches is marked, forming a deadly and easily traceable circle. The farmer starved the land, the land starved the farmer, the farmer starved the church, the church starved the preacher; then the better-educated minister went away, and some one who had crept into the ministry by the back door—a half-educated and half-hearted man—took the vacant place. He, in his turn, is starving the farmer and the farmer's family both mentally and spiritually.

Missouri shows up even worse. The records of three representative rural counties — Knox, Adair, and Sullivan — give only twenty-nine per cent church membership, both Protestant and Catholic, out of 53,701 population. There are five Catholic churches taking care of six per cent of the people. Each of these churches has clubs for men, for women, and for young people respectively. There are one hundred and eighty Protestant churches ministering to twenty-three per cent of the population. One-fourth of these are growing, twenty-one have been abandoned.

The average membership of the Missouri country church is fifty-three. In twenty-three villages, averaging 241 persons to a village, there are fifty-six churches. Four villages — Novelty and Newark, in Knox County, and Gibbs and Brashear, in Adair County—have four churches each. Two of these villages have less than 225 inhabitants, giving each church a parish of forty-five persons.

There is not a men's club or organization among the Protestant churches. Nothing is being attempted in the way of social welfare or entertainment. In many of the churches, preaching is held only at intervals, as one minister is trying to serve three or four organizations. It requires $50,500 a year to keep the 159 semianimated Protestant churches going at all.

UNION OF CHURCHES THE URGENT NEED

In the first place, the boards of home missions, sustentation, or church extension of the various denominations ought not to contribute money to any church in an overchurched region. If a number of rigid sectarians in any given neighborhood have not sufficient charity to worship with their fellow Christians, they should at least be compelled to pay for the luxury of their differentiating dogmas.

In the next place, the leading men, both clerical and lay, of all denominations of kindred faith should begin at once a propaganda designed to reach the rural districts. The points of agreement in doctrine and polity should be emphasized, and grounds of union pointed out. Where organic union is impossible or inexpedient, a form of federation should be advocated, by which churches of any given locality could be grouped for worship and social service.

In the third place, an economic conscience should be developed in the matter of church finance. Four churches, existing in a kind of suspended animation on a revenue of five hundred dollars a year each, would be a vigorous and aggressive institution if united and possessed of an income of two thousand dollars. The proceeds of a sale of the three abandoned churches would equip a building really adequate to the needs of the neighborhood.

Wherever the country church has become vitally related to the life of the community,

it has been successful. The ideal is not impossible of attainment, if the farmers will use the same common sense that they ordinarily give to the establishment of the communal grain-elevator, cheese-factory, or day-school, and if they are not encouraged in sectarian crankiness by denominational leaders and literature.

THE MISSION OF THE COUNTRY CHURCH

The first mission of the rural church must of course be spiritual. There is no danger, however, of that function being minimized. Every minister's call and consecration rest upon the primacy of the spiritual. But in order to strengthen and make that mission real, the interest of the soul must be related to every other interest of life.

Two-thirds of the rural population of America are practically untouched by the church. If the churches were so established and maintained that they could influence the social, intellectual, and business life of the community, this would be immediately changed. The farmer will not object to driving as far to the church as he does to the store or the post-office, if the church becomes as necessary to his well-being as the store and the post-office.

The ministry of the country church should be specially trained for its work. The preacher must know something about the regeneration of the soil, as well as of the soul. In the Bible, Jehovah is the giver of fertility to the fields, and His representatives of to-day cannot afford to be ignorant about the value of nitrogen. There is no reason why men should not dedicate their lives to a country ministry, with adequate special preparation, if the churches will unite and give them a living wage and a field that holds possibilities of permanent service.

But the essential thing is that the local churches should coalesce in such a way that they can establish and maintain a plant that will furnish a worthy expression of their life.

The village or open-country churches, to-day, are chiefly the one-room type—an oblong, barnlike structure, furnished with hard, straight-backed pews. With a proper amalgamation, that may become one of a cluster of buildings, or a part of a multiform plant. There should be a reading-room and a library; a play-room, perhaps a bowling-alley and a pool-table; a place for exhibitions and lectures bearing upon agriculture or social enjoyment. The curse of the country is its social sterility, and nothing but the church can safely remove that curse.

The recreation of the young people should be encouraged and supervised by the church, with suitable grounds — baseball diamonds and tennis-courts — and with regular field-days and tournaments and fairs, where such are not already conducted by county or State associations. But none of these ideals can be reached by the present little segregations, each occupied in its vain struggle for existence.

The only way in which the country churches can regain and maintain their hold upon the people, and minister to the total life of the community, is to find a basis of union and sink their infinitesimal differences of doctrine and polity. Then they will really serve their age as their Master served His.

IN THE CITY—A MEMORY OF HOME

THROUGH purple twilight still the eye may mark,
Like slender campaniles, fretted tiles
And towering chimneys, where the sunset smiles
Softly beneath the slowly gathering dark.
A silence falls upon the shadowy park;
And past the clustered tree-tops, miles on miles,
Borne faintly from afar through leafy aisles,
The homesick fancy hears a farm-dog's bark.

And now I breathe the scent of clover-fields;
Through summer gloom the fitful fireflies roam;
A distant bell makes silvery appeals
From the low vale beneath its starry dome;
And lo, o'er leagues of winking lights there steals,
Dewy and sweet, the memory of home!

James B. Kenyon